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Ticketed Entry for Agritourism

ISSUE

Due to the COVID-19-pandemic, agritourism enterprises experienced significant disruptions in how they could operate. When some state governments' required capacity reductions for visitors, traditionally profitable events, such as school field trips and weddings, were cancelled. Where on-farm events were permitted, farm operators needed to manage crowds safely.

INNOVATION

Agritourism operators developed timed, ticketed entry systems to manage the flow of visitors. These systems were often mediated by online platforms. By restricting visitor capacity, farm operators could better allocate resources to create safe conditions for visitors.

OUTCOME

Timed, ticketed entry shifted visitor traffic to less attended weekdays and the non-peak season. With more evenly distributed crowds, farm operators could focus on maintaining a safe environment. Overall, the ticketing innovation helped build and maintain trust between agritourism operators and their visitors – both new and long-time. Additionally, digital platforms allowed farms to access useful data on visitor characteristics, which is helping with long-term customer engagement.

On-farm events can be significant money-makers for farms and orchards. At some operations, visitors pay an entrance fee to visit corn mazes, farm-themed playgrounds, pig races, and petting zoos. At others, farm operators advertise u-pick opportunities for fruits and vegetables or offer on-farm retail operations. Some venues host weddings and other special events. Whatever the approach, agritourism relies on the flow of visitors onto farms. However, during a pandemic, farm operators must deal with numerous challenges to maintain a safe experience for visitors.

In March 2020, when COVID-19 cases escalated in the US, agritourism operations scrambled to adjust to pandemic-related conditions. Stay-at-home orders in some states reduced the potential visitor base for many farms which led to events, such as school field trips being cancelled. Spring on-farm functions were reduced or cancelled. Despite these significant disruptions, many agritourism operations developed creative strategies to deal with this new reality.

Individuals and families who were stuck at home during the pandemic sought outdoor, socially distanced activities. This interest provided farms with many opportunities to draw in new visitors. Some farms increased their u-pick options which created opportunities for individuals to get out of the house, have an outdoor experience, and take-home farm fresh products. Others advertised their on-farm retail operations to draw in consumers wary of crowded supermarkets. Several also offered outdoor play areas that catered to families. Ultimately, uncertainty regarding if and how visitors could attend farm events led to the development of online purchasing systems. This shift allowed farms to continue drawing visitors for online/curbside sales and meal kits without worrying about on-farm liability.

Regardless of strategy, farm operators still needed to manage crowds. Farms with visitors had to respect state mandates and reduced capacity requirements. Timed, ticketed entry was, and continues to be, a useful innovation to manage the flow of visitors.

Using ticketed entry, farm operators designate a specific number of entries over a fixed duration of time based on estimates of maximum capacity. Customers sign up, often using online scheduling platforms, for a time slot and must attend during that window. Farms encourage customers to sign up in advance but many still honor walk-up visitors if the farm is not at capacity. Although some farms utilized online ticketing systems prior to the pandemic, timed entry was less important. The time limited aspect of ticketing was a critical innovation developed during COVID-19.

Facebook Event Page, Lucky Ladd Farms

Positive Impacts of Ticketed Entry

Agritourism operators observed many positive impacts of timed, ticketed entry. First, they were able to efficiently control crowds and meet the state mandates. By reducing capacity on weekends, visitor traffic was displaced to the traditionally less-crowded weekdays. As schools shifted models to virtual formats and many individuals worked from home, visitors' time was more flexible. So, while sales and number of visitors decreased on the weekends, weekday visits increased compared to normal years. One farm estimated that even with 50% capacity, nearly 90% of their fall dates sold out and weekday attendance increased by 2-3 times the average. While they initially projected significant losses, sales increased by 10%, compared to 2019.

Second, farm operators were better able to plan for staffing and product demands while using timed, ticketed entry. With a consistent crowd, operators reallocated resources more efficiently. Farms reduced admissions staffing and re-allocated resources to other important areas such as sanitation, online ticketing, and on-farm sales. Control over visitor flow reduced one area of complexity for farms. One farm reported that they were able to close an extra day per week without seeing a significant impact on the bottom line.

They stated that two days off each week allowed them to recharge, do extra planning, and enjoy life a bit more!

The third impact is increased customer interest. Long-time visitors mentioned that reduced crowd sizes resulted in a more pleasant experience, which was reflected in online ratings. Additionally, farm operators discussed how timed, ticketed entry was, in part, a marketing strategy. By articulating a firm policy on and commitment to COVID-19-related safety, they built trust with their visitors. Ticketed entry indicated that the farm was taking the pandemic seriously and committed to visitor safety. To some degree, tickets create a sense of exclusivity which may make associated events more compelling to the consumer. Hypothetically, a visitor who sees all time slots filled for the current week, may be incentivized to buy immediately for the following week. What is lost in convenience (i.e. spontaneous or walk-up visits) is gained in creating a sense that the farm visit is an event. Farms hope to create long-term relationships with visitors through these mechanisms.

Facebook Event Page, Lucky Ladd Farms

Building Better Beyond:
opportunities and considerations

Commercial event ticket systems require significant upfront expenses in software, training, and data management. As a result, agritourism operations that use these systems may feel compelled to continue using them beyond the pandemic. According to FarmPass, a widely used ticketing platform, approximately 90% of agritourism operators who use their online ticketing service shifted toward requiring a timed ticket during the pandemic. FarmPass's sales increased by 700%. Additionally, 70% of their customers (i.e. agritourism operators) were using online ticketing for the first time.[1] Agritourism operators using FarmPass saw an average increase of $100,000 in online ticket sales. The North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association (NAFDMA) has seen a similar wide-scale adoption of online ticketing systems by agritourism operators.

The increased use of online ticketing in agritourism has broader implications. While initially adopting online and timed tickets to manage crowd health and safety, farm operators are seeing other benefits from these systems. For instance, online ticketing systems provided data that can be used for long-term planning and to analyze consumer behavior. Ticket data can help to distinguish between characteristics of first-time and long-time visitors. Customer zip codes can be used to identify the representative geographic information of their customer base. Peak visitor days and times can come from analyzing which days met capacity, which is especially important for u-pick planning.

Ticketing data can also help to 1) target advertising efforts, 2) plan labor and production, 3) plan retail inventory needs, and 4) set weekday and offseason rates. Since many farms developed online

sales platforms alongside these ticketing systems, they can determine what product types were most profitable and popular at different times of the year. During the pandemic, farm operators noted that 'comfort spending' on jams and other value-added products increased. Product sales data can help integrate the retail and 'agritainment' aspects of farm operations. In short, visitor data can shape farm-level planning and lead to the development of best practices post-pandemic.

It is possible, however, that the timed entry option of online ticketing may not play as much of a role once the threat of COVID-19 diminishes. Even in 2020, half of spring and summer ticketed sales were made on the day of the visit. Visitors like the convenience of making a last-minute decision for a farm visit, especially to take into account the weather. However, farm operators who invested in online purchasing platforms will still likely benefit from offering tickets online since some consumers may prefer pre-purchasing entry to events. Farms can 1) incentivize early online and timed tickets with discounts, 2) offer variable pricing based on day of week and time of year, 3) share digital infrastructure with e-commerce strategies related to farm products, 4) promote different farm events through customer contact information gathered from previous online purchases, and 5) continue to analyze customer characteristics. All of these benefits are facilitated by online platforms and can extend beyond the pandemic.

[1] Data collected through direct communication with Farm Pass on 4/22/21. See farmpass.com for more information on this particular platform.

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Thanks for reading!

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